

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
National Foreign Assessment Center

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Effects of Escalating Pressures on
Key Iranian Leadership Elements(U)

In responding to events in Iran, the United States will have to consider the reactions of three key Iranian leadership elements--Khomeini, the captors in the US Embassy, and the Revolutionary Council. The following memorandum outlines the anticipated reactions of these elements to various forms of US pressure, economic and military; it also outlines their reactions to a challenge to the legitimacy of Khomeini's religious authority, as well as other threats to internal stability.

Economic Sanctions

Economic sanctions by the US and its allies or by the UN in general would have no deterrent effect upon Khomeini, a man who simply cannot yield under pressure. Indeed, Khomeini would mount a counter escalation of his own which could include further anti-US tirades aimed at arousing internal Iranian support and that of the "oppressed" Muslim peoples of the world.

For the captors, such sanctions would also have no deterrent effect. Should sanctions include interruption of telecommunications to and from Iran, however, the captors would become increasingly frustrated as the limelight faded. Some among them could lose

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interest, although most would press to regain attention through media events and/or moves toward trials of some or all of the hostages.

The more pragmatic members of the Revolutionary Council would likely respond to economic sanctions as they become concerned about the sanctions' impact on Iran. Although rivalries would persist, there would be decreased divisiveness amongst the council along with a growing agreement that the hostage situation should be defused. Although they will not confront him directly, members will attempt to influence the Ayatollah through the information they convey to him and through his concern for the integrity of the Islamic Republic. Nevertheless, we doubt that they will be very effective.

Naval Blockade

Should the US impose a blockade on Iran, both Khomeini and the captors would further harden their stands. Khomeini would likely counter with incitement of Shia oil workers in the neighboring Gulf states, and curtailment of oil shipments to US allies in an effort to build counter pressure on the US: he would also exhort the Iranian populace to prepare for all-out war. The captors would commence trials. The danger of physical abuse to the hostages would increase, although executions would not likely occur. As for the Revolutionary Council, pragmatic members would fear for Iran's integrity--and their own positions of power--and may attempt to deter Khomeini from his confrontational course. Again, they would be ineffectual.

Military Strikes

With the advent of US military strikes of either a "surgical" or more widespread nature, Khomeini would remain unyielding and his capacity for martyrdom would be engaged. Although he would remain concerned about the integrity of Iran, he is quite capable of justifying its destruction in order to promote his higher goal of a widespread, anti-US, pan-Islamic resurgence amongst the "oppressed" of the Muslim world.

Any loss of Iranian lives would push the captors into executions of at least some of the hostages. There could arise some splits in the captors' ranks, however, as the Islamic fundamentalists see their goal of an ideal Islamic Republic threatened. For their part, the Revolutionary Council would be unable to deter Khomeini in his march toward martyrdom and would exercise no control over the captors.

Challenge to the Legitimacy of Khomeini's Religious Authority

Should Khomeini be exposed to effective challenges to his authority on religious grounds, he would respond by labelling them as products of an external plot under the direction of the US; he would launch into increasingly vitriolic speeches playing upon the

themes of pan-Islamic resurgence with himself as its paramount leader. Khomeini would have great psychological difficulty dealing with a challenge from the Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, the second most powerful cleric in Iran next to Khomeini and leader of the Azarbayjanis.

If successful, a challenge to Khomeini's religious legitimacy could weaken the loyalty of the Islamic fundamentalist amongst the captors and would diminish the ability of the Marxist elements to use the Ayatollah as a cover for pursuing their own goals. It is unclear, however, how this would affect the fate of the hostages. The members of the Revolutionary Council would likely first be defensive because Khomeini is their sole source of power. Should Khomeini's popular support begin to falter, the more pragmatic, less radical elements would likely start pursuing their own personal interests.

Major Threats to Stability From Ethnic Minorities or Neighboring Countries

Khomeini could well become distracted from the hostage situation temporarily because of a major uprising by some or all of Iran's several ethnic minorities or because of an attack from Iraq. For psychological reasons, a concerted Shariat-Madari-backed uprising in Azarbayjan would be particularly distracting. The Azheris are Iran's largest minority, and Shariat-Madari, who is widely respected for his religious expertise, reputedly saved Khomeini from prolonged imprisonment at the hands of SAVAK in 1963. Conforming to his previous pattern, Khomeini would automatically assign responsibility for any internal uprisings or Iraqi incursion to the US. Nevertheless, during his period of distraction, pragmatic members of the Revolutionary Council may well have a wider latitude to express moderate views and would be able to influence Khomeini to a greater degree, although their influence over the captives would remain minimal. Once the troubles subsided however, Khomeini would again revert to his hardline policy on the hostages.

The captors would likely feel a need to regain the spotlight. This need would increase the likelihood that they would take independent action with the hostages, possibly seeking greater media play with hostage interviews and further "revelations" of classified material. They would also likely press actively for trials.

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